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AZTEC ART - Part 2

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TERRACOTTA SCULPTURE

For most cultures in Mesoamerica, terracotta sculpture was one of the principal forms of art during the Pre-Classic and Classic periods. The Aztecs, however, were infatuated with the permanence of stone, and so worked less often in clay than most of their neighbors. Except for a few larger hollow figurines, most Aztec terracotta sculptures are small, solid, mold-made figurines. According to Pasztory (1983), terracotta sculptures are fundamental in identifying the cult practices and gods of the lower class Aztecs in cities and remote areas. Their main subjects are the deities of nature and fertility and mothers with children; less frequently death may be the subject of a piece. Death and sacrifice seem to be the focus of noble terracotta works.

Eagle Warrior

This ceramic figure was found inside of the House of Eagles, a building constructed in a Neo-Toltec style, north of the Great Temple in Mexico City [[Fig. 49](#)]. He wears an eagle helmet, his arms are covered with wings, and his legs are adorned with claws. Some remaining stucco paint reveals that the feathers on his clothes were painted in white.

Besides representing the mighty eagle warriors, this figure, along with another figurine found in the same place, is believed to symbolize the sun at dawn. This sculpture was

on top of a multi-colored bench with the figures of warriors marching toward a *zacatapayolli* (a ball of grass in which the blood-letting instruments were inserted). The House of Eagles served as a place dedicated to prayer ceremonies, self-sacrifice, and spiritual rituals (See Section of Architecture).

Mictlantecuhtli

This figure was also found in the House of Eagles on top of benches, and it represents Mictlantecuhtli, god of the dead [Fig. 50]. Mictlantecuhtli lived in a damp and cold place known as Mictlan, which was the underworld, or lower part of the cosmos--a universal womb where human remains were kept.

The god is shown wearing a loincloth and small holes in his scalp indicate that at one time, curly human hair decorated his head, typical of earth and death god figurines. His claw-like hands are poised as if ready to attack someone. Most dramatically, he is represented with his flesh wide-open below his chest. According to Matos and Solís (2002), out of the opened flesh in the stomach, a great liver appears, the organ where the *ihiyotl* (soul) dwells. The liver was connected to Mictlan, the Underworld. The *ihiyotl* is one of the three mystical elements that inhabits the human body; the *tonalli*, the determinant of one's fate, is located in the head, and the *teyolia*, the house of consciousness, resides in the heart. In this sculpture the deity is showing where one of those three mystical elements rests in the human body until death.

Xipec Totec

Xipec Totec had been worshipped by the Mesoamerican people since the Classic period. Xipec Totec was the god of vegetation and agricultural renewal, and was one of the patron gods associated to the 13-day periods in the divinatory calendar [Fig. 51]. He was also the patron of the festival Tlacaxipehualiztli, held before the coming of the rains, in which captives were sacrificed. After the sacrificed bodies were flayed, priests wore the skins for 20 days.

Xipec Totec is depicted in the sculpture as a man with a flayed skin. A rope, sculpted in detail, ties the skin at the back, head, and chest. This piece forms part of a series of

great images created by Pre-Columbian artists, who expressed their deeply held belief that only through death can life exist. The difference between the tight skin layer and the animate form inside is represented in a simple manner, without the gruesome dramatization that is typical in the images of death gods and goddesses. Remarkably, the sculpture still retains its original paint; the flayed skin is yellow and the skin of Xipe Totec is red.

CERAMICS

The Aztecs made several functional and ceremonial objects out of clay: incense burners, dishes, ritual vessels, funerary urns, stamps, and spindle whorls. Large vase-shaped incense burners were sometimes over 3 feet in height with a figure in high relief on one side or an ornament of projections and flanges. Red ware goblets were often made for drinking *pulque* at feasts. Many of these clay objects had decoration but usually without the elaborate iconographic meaning that characterized monumental sculpture and manuscript painting.

One of the most amazing works of Aztec art is a clay urn resting on three tilted cylinder legs, found in Tlatelolco.

The ceramics of the Valley of Mexico have been divided into nine different wares on the basis of clay, type, vessel shape, surface, and decoration. Orange and red wares are the most common. Red ware, generally associated with Tetzaco, is usually highly burnished and painted with a red slip; its painted designs are in black, black and white, or black, white and yellow, and they consist of simple lines and frets that often appear boldly applied. These vessels vary significantly in quality. Red ware was sometimes completely covered with white slip, then painted with black designs of skulls and crossed bones. In its controlled quality the line and design suggest Mixteca-Puebla vessels.

Vessel with a mask of Tlaloc

According to Matos and Solís (2002), this vessel was part of offering 56 at the Great

Temple of Tenochtitlan, facing north in the direction of the Temple of Tlaloc. As part of an offering, the pot was put inside a box made out of volcanic rock containing remains of aquatic creatures and shells, symbols of water and fertility. The box also contained a sacrificial knife (*tecpatl*) and two bowls of *copal* (incense).

This vessel represents the rain god Tlaloc [Fig. 52]. On the outside of the vessel, Tlaloc features goggle-like eyes and two fangs; a serpent surrounds his mouth forming what looks like a moustache. The god wears a white headdress, a reference to the mountains where the deity was believed to keep his waters, a place where fertility flourishes and water flows down the hills to nourish the soil. In whole, the vessel symbolizes the uterus and the feminine powers of creation.

Funerary Urn with image of god Tezcatlipoca

This urn was found in the Great Temple, near the monolith of the great goddess Coyolxauhqui [Fig. 53]. Cremated bones of Aztec warriors who probably died in battle against the Tarascans of Michoacan during the reign of king Axayacatl were found inside. A necklace of beads, a spear point, and a bone perforator were also inside.

Inside a rectangle carved on the outside wall of the urn lies the image of Tezcatlipoca surrounded by a feathered serpent with a forked tongue. Wearing a headdress full of eagle feathers, symbols connected to the sun, the deity seems to be armed and ready for battle. He has a spear thrower in one hand and two spears in the other. In the hand holding the two spears he wears a protector similar to the ones used in Toltec imagery. He wears a smoking mirror, his characteristic symbol, on one of his feet.

According to Matos and Solis (2002), this urn represents one of those warriors that embodies the image of the god Tezcatlipoca (smoking mirror), a creator god that inhabits the four horizontal directions and the three vertical levels of the cosmos. Tezcatlipoca is also the protector of warriors, kings, and sorcerers and the god of the cold who symbolized the dark night sky. He was considered invisible and mysterious.

Flutes

In Aztec festivities, clay flutes were commonly played. The shape and decoration of

these instruments varied according to the gods being worshipped at the time [\[Fig. 54\]](#). According to Matos and Solís (2002), at the feast of Toxcatl, the person chosen to personify the god Tezcatlipoca played a sad melody with a thin flute with a flower shape at the end while walking up to the temple to be sacrificed. Depending on the occasion, the Aztecs made flutes with different shapes, such as the image of the god Huehuetēōtl-Xiuhtecuhtli. The god is shown as an old man with a beard symbolizing wisdom. Another flute ends with the shape of an eagle, a symbol of divine fire, the sun, and warriors. The eagle seems to be wearing a headdress. Some flutes have elegant ornaments, like the step-fret design used in Aztec-Mixtec gold rings. This flute shows the blending of the Aztec and Mixtec cultures, and suggests that besides wars, there was trade and exchange of cultural traditions.

WOOD ART

Wood was not just a substitute for stone. Many of the icons, or idols, in the major Aztec temples were made out of wood and dressed in beautiful clothes and jewelry. However, the symbolic significance of wood for the Aztecs is unclear. Many Aztec texts refer to the superiority of stone figures to wooden ones because of their durability and endurance. But, in weight, flexibility, and resonance, wood was the perfect material for such objects as drums, spear-throwers, shields, and masks. Some objects were also made of wood so that they could be burned symbolically as offerings.

Huehuetl (Vertical Drum) of Malinalco

In the town of Malinalco, it was found a wooden *tlalpanhuehuetl* or war drum, still used in some ceremonies until 1894, when it was transferred to its present location in the Museum of the City of Toluca [\[Fig. 55\]](#). The *Huehuetl* contains the date *Nahui-Ollin* (4-Movement). The *Ollin* symbol was used to represent the movement of the Sun and the dynamic life of the World. From the word *ollin* derives *yollotl* (heart) and *yoliztli* (life). Inside of this particular *Ollin* we find a ray emanating from a solar eye and a *chalchihuitl* (precious stone). The Sun was considered as the “Shining One”, the “Precious Child”, the “Jade” and “Xiuhpiltontli” (Turquoise Child). The date *nahui-ollin* alludes to *Ollin-Tonatiuh*, the Sun of Movement, the present world that will be destroyed by

earthquakes, and to the festival of *Nahui-Ollin*, described by Durán (1967), in which the messenger of the Sun was sacrificed.

To the right of the date *Nahui-Ollin*, the artist carved the outstanding figure of an *ocelotl* (jaguar) and to the left a *cuauhtli* (eagle), both dancing. These images represent *cuauhtli* and *ocelotl* warriors, distinguished orders of the Aztec army. These warriors carry the flag of sacrifice (*pámitl*) and wear a headdress with heron feathers (*aztaxelli*), a symbol of hierarchy.

In the lower sections that support the *Huehuetl*, there are two more *ocelotl* warriors and one *cuauhtli* warrior. From the mouths and beaks of the warriors and around their paws and claws, appears the glyph *Atl-Tlachinolli*, or *Teuatl-Tlachinolli*, that means “divine water (blood)-fire”; it signals the call of war and is sometimes represented as a song and dance of war. This metaphor *Atl-Tlachinolli* is expressed in sculpture, carvings, and the codices as two intertwined rivers, one of water and the other of fire. The stream of water ends with pearls and conches, while the stream of fire ends with the body of the *xiuhcoatl* (snake of fire) who is emitting a flame.

All the warriors depicted on the *Huehuetl* have in one of their eyes the sign *atl* (water), which indicates that they are crying while they sing. This sign reveals the duality of feelings before the sacrifice. One of the *ocelotl* warriors has behind one of his paws the sign *atl* combined with an *aztamecatl* (rope), indicating that he is a *Uauantin* (captive striped in red) who will be sacrificed in the *temalácatl*. This recalls the image of a warrior carrying a rope in the mural of Temple III of the site. The *cuauhtli* warriors have hanging among their feathers obsidian knives (*tecpatl*), symbols of human sacrifice.

A band divides the two parts of the *Huehuetl* and portrays *chimallis* (shields) with bundles of cotton and arrows (*tlacochtli*), sacrificial flags (*pamitl*) and a continuous stream of the glyph *Atl-Tlachinolli*. All of these are metaphors of war. Interestingly, the *Huehuetl* represents a real event in Malinalco: the scene of *cuauhtli-ocelotl* warriors singing, dancing and crying in the festival of *Nahui-Ollin*, that ended with the dance of the messenger of the Sun who, ascending the staircase to reach the doorway of the

Cuauhcalli, would be sacrificed and his heart and blood would be placed in the *cuauhxicalli* that stood behind the eagle-shaped image of the Sun (See Malinalco's Temples in Section of architecture). The Sun is called when is in ascension *Cuauhtehuanitl* (Rising Sun) and in the afternoon when it is descending is called *Cuauhtemoc* (Setting Sun).

The Sun was considered as the young warrior that every day at dawn, fight in the heavens to defeat the darkness, stars and moon (*metztli*), using as weapons the *xiuhcoatl*s (snakes of fire, solar rays). In this way he ascends to the zenith, preceded by Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, the morning star (Venus).

At dusk, the Sun, preceded by Xolotl, the evening star (Venus) sets in Tlillan Tlapallan, the Land of the Black and Red, and descends to the underground transformed into a jaguar to illuminate the world of the dead. The next dawn, in an endless cycle, he will repeat his cosmic fight to bring a new day to humankind.

The *Huehuetl* of Malinalco presents the image of Cuauhtehuanitl, Tonatiuh in his eagle embodiment (Huitzilopochtli), ascending to the zenith in the sky [Fig. 56]. The face of the god is emerging from the beak of the eagle and has a turquoise (*yacaxihuitl*) in his nose. Under his chin appears the sign of singing, *cuicatl*, which indicates that the deity ascends singing. The feathers of the eagle are stylized in a way that resembles the precious feathers of the quetzal.

The ascending Sun (*Cuauhtehuanitl*) is accompanied by the *xiuhcoatl*s (snakes of fire) who carry him during his daily cycle. They are also the embodiments of the solar rays. We can see the representation of the heads of the *xiuhcoatl*s featuring open mouth with fangs, solar eye and a horn. One of them has a realistic shape, while the other is portrayed with more abstraction, but shows the same characteristic elements.

The quality of the Aztec sculpture and carving applied to this *Huehuetl* is so precise and refined that it is comparable to the amazing and powerful expression of the codices. The images shown by this musical masterwork confirm and complement our hypothesis about the function and uses of the "Cuauhtinchan" (Temple I) of Malinalco.

Teponaztli (Horizontal Drum) of a Feline

The *teponaztli*, a horizontal type of drum still in use today, was another popular instrument used by the Aztecs [Fig. 57]. The drum is a double-tongued xylophone. The tongues are made out of slits positioned in a hollowed piece of wood that works as the sound box. Hammers in the shape of sticks with rubber tips were used to hit the tongues, thereby producing the tones and melodies of the drum. A *teponaztli* from Malinalco is in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. After the Spanish conquest, the missionaries prohibited traditional Mexica ritual practices and they often destroyed artifacts belonging to those rituals; it is fortunate that this *teponaztli* survives.

The animal carved on this horizontal drum is either a crouching coyote or a type of jaguar with its tail next to its left side. It could represent the *nahual* (soul or double) of a *coyotl* or a jaguar warrior. However, the curls on the head of the animal have led some scholars to identify it as an *ahuitzotl*, or a water-thorn beast, possibly a water possum. Amazingly, this horizontal drum still has the original canine teeth and molars placed inside the mouth to make the animal look more realistic and ferocious.

Teponaztli (Horizontal Drum) with Effigy of a Warrior

The human effigy depicted on this *teponaztli* is a representation of a reclining Tlaxcalan warrior [Fig. 58]. Matos and Solís (2002) point out that the representation of this warrior is decorated with the unique military emblems of his Tlaxcalan culture. His weapons include the jaw of a sawfish and an axe with a copper blade. The eyes of the warrior still preserve their shell and obsidian inlays.

Tlaloc

This wood sculpture is an example of a work meant to be burned in honor of Tlaloc. Such figures were made out of resin and copal applied to sticks and burnt after a prayer was offered Tlaloc. The Aztecs believed that the smoke rising from the burning resin and copal would make the clouds dark and cause them to liberate a fertilizing rain over the earth. This image was found inside a cave in Iztaccihuatl volcano.

This sculpture features the characteristics consistently attributed to the rain god Tlaloc: ear ornaments, goggle-like eyes, protruding fangs, and a headdress symbolizing the mountains where he kept water. This sculpture also features a folded paper bow behind Tlaloc's neck, which, according to Matos and Solís (2002), represents the *tlaquechpanyotl*, the sign of the deity's noble ancestry.

FEATHER WORK

Among the large variety of media utilized by the Aztec craftsmen/artists, their feather work is perhaps the least known today. The Aztecs became master feather-crafters before the arrival of the Spaniards, and had developed highly sophisticated methods of gathering feathers throughout their territories and incorporating them into objects of impressive visual impact and surprising durability. The artists in the village of Amatlan (a district of Tenochitlan) were exceptionally known for their feather work.

The *amanteca* (feather-workers) either fixed their precious tropical feathers on light reed frameworks by tying each one onto the backing with cotton, or fastened them on cloth or paper to form mosaics in which certain effects of color were obtained by exploiting their transparent qualities. Belonging exclusively to the Aztecs, this art lingered in the form of little feather icons after the Conquest and then almost disappeared entirely.

Only a handful of these original masterpieces have survived, and today there are only a handful of artists scattered in diverse cities of Mexico who keep the art of feather-work alive. While the Spanish did not consider feather-works to be as valuable as gold or precious stones, nor a treasure worth preserving, they sent shiploads of it to Spain as curiosities from the New World. The many churches, monasteries, and individuals who received these precious gifts did not protect them from the natural process of decay, and out of hundreds of costumes, mantles, standards, and shields sent to Europe, today only a few pieces are known to exist. There are some surviving examples, such as Christian symbols, made in colonial times in a style similar to that of the Renaissance, that constitute the best of feather-work.

Pasztory (1983) affirms that colorful tropical birds such as the scarlet macaw, various species of parrot, red spoonbill, blue cotinga, and the quetzal provided most of the vibrant feathers used in mosaic feather-work. The most common colors used were red and yellow. The most precious colors used were blue and green, the colors of water and agriculture, fertility and creation. Green quetzal feathers were among the rarest and most sought after; in Nahuatl, *quetzal* meant precious. The two long green tail feathers of the male quetzal birds were collected for great headdresses and standards. Unfortunately, the precious bird quetzal is today an endangered species. Almost as precious as the quetzal were hummingbird feathers; often greenish in color, hummingbird feathers become iridescent when lit from certain angles.

As pointed out by Castelló Iturbide (1993), together with stones such as jade and turquoise, feathers were considered among the most valued objects of Mesoamerica. They were so highly venerated that statues of Aztec deities were clothed in cloaks full of brilliant feathers and precious stones. Viewed in magical terms, feathers were considered icons of fertility, abundance, and wealth and power, and they connected the individual or statue wearing them with the divine. According to Fray Diego Durán (1967), the Aztecs believed that the feathers were shadows of the deities.

The Headdress of Motecuhzoma II

Assembled from five hundred quetzal feathers taken from 250 birds, this feather headdress is one of the best examples that have survived over time [\[Fig. 59\]](#). Despite its name, it is still unclear if it was used or it belonged to this emperor. According to Pasztory (1983), a model of a crown used by Motecuhzoma was depicted in the Codex Mendoza, and it was composed of turquoise, not feathers. The headdress probably derives its name from this traditional story: when Motecuhzoma met Cortés, he gave the Conquistador luxurious items that included headdresses, gold and silver objects, clothes, among many other things, in a diplomatic gesture to please and salute Emperor Charles V. When the brother of Charles V, Ferdinand, married, he received the Headdress of Motecuhzoma II that had been stored in the Ambras Castle in Tyrol,

Austria. In time, the art collections of the Habsburg Monarchy were placed in state museums, and now the famous headdress is housed in the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, together with a feathered fan and the Ahuizotl Shield. There is a replica of the headdress in the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City [\[Fig. 60\]](#).

This kind of feather headdress was probably used as a military insignia instead of a crown. The feather headdress would have been placed on a bamboo stick and positioned on a distinguished soldier's back. Pasztory (1983) has suggested that there is evidence that headdresses, such as this piece, were part of the Aztec royalty for ritualistic purposes, especially to be worn when impersonating the god Quetzalcoatl.

Feathered Fan

In pre-Conquest periods, fans were a symbol of noble and *pochteca* (professional traders) classes. According to Matos and Solís (2002), fans gave a fancy touch to the wardrobes of the *tlatoani* (Emperor) and his royal family, who always looked elegant and distinguished. The fans were eye-catching pieces constructed of wood and decorated with colorful feathers.

A fan found north of the Tlaloc Temple, in a place considered to be part of the sacred precinct of the Aztec capital, was restored by a professional feather-worker and is kept in the National Museum of Anthropology of Mexico City. The tip of the fan depicts the head of a warrior who is well dressed for war. Another beautiful example of a preserved fan can be found in the Museum of Ethnology of Vienna [\[Fig. 62\]](#).

Ahuizotl Shield

The *Chimalli* (shield) of Ahuizotl was a gift from Hernán Cortés to Don Pedro de la Gasca, Bishop of Palencia, Spain. It is an assemblage of different types of feathers, including feathers from scarlet macaws, blue cotingas, rose spoonbills, and yellow orioles; tassels of feathers hang from the lower edge [\[Fig. 63\]](#). Vegetable fibers hold together the base of reed splints that supports the colorfully arranged plumage. On the back, two loops are formed to allow the shield to be carried.

The Ahuizotl Shield portrays the figure of a *Coyotl* warrior in gold and feathers. The

symbol of the sacred war *atl-tlachinolli* (the water, the fire) comes out of his mouth, indicating that he is shouting a call or song of war. The figure depicted on the shield is not an *ahuitzotl* (fantastical water being) as has been traditionally identified. Water creatures are linked to the rain god Tlaloc. Rather, the animal represented may be a coyote associated to warfare and a military Aztec order.

The Ahuitzotl Shield is housed in the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna, along with the Headdress of Motecuhzoma II and a feathered fan.

Chalice Cover

This object, found by Rafael García Granados, comes from the early transitional times of the campaign to convert all of the Mesoamerican indigenous populations to Catholicism [Fig. 64]. The blue creature adorning the cover may be related to the god Tlaloc, since it has goggle-like eyes and a moustache. If this is true, the cover may be associated with one of the most sacred liquids of the universe—water. According to Matos and Solís (2002), the circular panel surrounding the creature in the center represents water in motion, and in terms of Christian doctrine, symbolizes the holy water communicating the message of God. God is shown as a stylized Aztec Tlaloc mask with fangs, which throws fire out of His mouth. In the context of Christianity, the fire represents the blood of the sacrificed Christ that cleanses the world of human sin; at the same time, the fire is an indigenous symbol of the primeval waters of the old Aztec deities. This piece expresses the complex process of transculturation that occurred during the 16th century in Mexico while two different cultures tried to establish a religious dialogue.

Christ the Savior

After the Spanish conquest, feather-art was applied to ritual objects with the shape and iconography of the new religion. One example is an embodiment of Christ the Savior, who blesses the World with his right hand. The orb that he holds in his left hand is an icon of sovereignty, which was considered, during the Middle Ages, an emblem of divine power. An inscription surrounds the image of Christ, but it has not yet been translated successfully.

LAPIDARY ARTS

The Aztecs had a very special interest in precious stones of all kinds. Since their culture was primarily Neolithic (New Stone Age), tools were predominantly made of stone, though copper tools were also utilized. Obsidian and flint were used to make the ritually valued sacrificial knives; obsidian also served as scraping and more domestic cutting implements.

The Mexica were particularly skilled at carving hard stones of different colors and brilliant surfaces, such as greenstone, porphyry, obsidian, rock crystal, turquoise, and onyx. From these stones, they created a variety of sculptures, vessels, and jewelry. In the lapidary art, the Aztecs made elaborate art pieces of rock-crystal, amethyst, jade, turquoise, obsidian, and other important stones, as well as mother of pearl. Using instruments of reed, sand, and emery, they arranged small pieces of stone in brilliant mosaics on backgrounds of bone, stucco, and wood.

It was a sign of status for the men of the highest class to learn the lapidary arts. Their technique was called *toltecayotl* (the matter of the Toltecs, or the Toltec thing) and was based on the Toltec artistic traditions that the Aztecs so admired.

The green stones, such as jadeite, diorite, and serpentine, were the most important precious stones in Mesoamerica. Jade beads were placed on a corpse's mouth as payment for the trip of the soul of the dead person through the Underworld, a tradition also found in ancient China. The greenstone acted as an offering to protect the soul in its journey through the afterlife. Greenstones were also buried in the floor of the temples. Green was a symbol for water and plants, life and fertility. The word *chalchihuitl* (jade symbol) was an embodiment of preciousness.

Greenstone, such as jade, came from the province of Guerrero and was offered as tribute by the southern provinces. The most famous lapidary artists in the Valley of Mexico were the artisans of Chalco and Xochimilco; the lapidary art was said to come from the artisans of Xochimilco.

Turquoise Mask

This beautiful blue mask is believed to represent Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire [\[Fig. 66\]](#). Matos and Solís (2002) state that the deity's name Xiuhtecuhtli (Turquoise Lord) is a derivative of the Nahuatl word for year (*xihuitl*), which makes him a deity of time. The turquoise pieces are affixed to a cedar wood base with a kind of resinous substance. Made out of pearl oyster shell, the eyes have a central hole suggesting that impersonators of divine beings in religious rituals wore the mask. His teeth are also made out of shells. This mask is one of the best surviving examples of its kind from the Post Classic period.

Double-Headed Serpent Pectoral

This pectoral features double-headed and intertwined serpents associated with the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl. Their jaws are open, symbolizing the caves of Mictlan, gateways to the underworld. The whole piece is a wooden base covered with turquoise mosaic inlays making it look as blue as the sky. The noses, gums, and teeth of the reptiles are inlaid with white and red shells.

Double headed and intertwined serpents were icons in Mesoamerican art that represented the sky [\[Fig. 67\]](#). The serpents were a symbol of renewal since they shed their skin. They are also metaphoric streams of blood. In this context, the pectoral is a work dedicated to life, which depends on death and the Underworld in order to renew itself.

It is believed that a priest or noble wore this pectoral in rituals connected to the birth of the god Huitzilipochtli, the patron Aztec god who was born at Coatepec, the "Snake Mountain".

Sacrificial Knife

The *tecpatl*, or sacrificial knife, was an important feature of Aztec rituals. With the knife, priests cut open the chests of sacrificial victims to extract the heart that would feed the gods, hoping that such a gift would bring blessings to humankind. On the few surviving *tecpatls*, there are some representations of deities on the handles. One famous pre-

Hispanic example is the carved image of a figure wearing a circular ear ornament and a large feather linking, associating the figure to Tonatiuh, the sun god. The arms of Tonatiuh seem to be supporting the blade. Matos and Solis (2002) state that the weapon of Huitzilopochtli, patron deity of war and the sun, is referenced in the handle by the presence of the *xiuhcoatl* (fire serpent). This particular knife emphasizes the importance of human sacrifice to the nourishment of the gods, especially the sun god, who illuminate the earth and sustain life.

This handle, separated from its blade, was discovered in Mexico City; the blade was attached later.

Knife with an Image of a Face

Found in the Great Temple in Tenochitlan, this knife bears a face in profile that is presumed to represent the year-bearer *tecpatl*, a lesser deity [Fig. 68]. Its teeth and eyes accentuate by inlaid white flint and obsidian, a volcanic rock. Since this a sacred sacrificial knife, it is symbolically connected with Mictlan, the lower part of the universe where beings without flesh lived. Mictlan was associated with the color black and the *tecpatl* (sacrificial knife). According to Matos and Solis (2002), this knife is associated to the black god Tezcatlipoca, who embodies an obsidian knife representing black wind. As a sacrificial knife, it is also associated with the North (the direction of death) and the flayed god Xipeec Totec.

GOLD WORK

As time passed by, the nomadic Aztecs became a society divided by distinct classes. Wealth and power belonged to the *pipiltin* (nobility). For the *pipiltin*, the Aztec metal workers made expensive and beautiful objects of gold. Though gold was not as desirable as green stone or turquoise, gold was a symbol of status. Tenochtitlan was the cosmopolitan center of Aztec art and people of Mixtec origin were encouraged to settle there because they were famous for their gold work, which was distributed all over the city and the empire.

According to Matos and Solís (2002), gold, combined with textiles and other precious stones, was used to ornament the dress of both the gods and humans, as shown in various manuscripts. The nobles in the Aztec society wore gold bells on their costumes. This clothing style was also depicted in monumental sculpture. After the Spanish Conquest, figures of gold and other precious stones were taken to European countries and were exhibited as exotic commodities. Hernán Cortés gave descriptions of such figures; for example, he saw a bird-shaped piece with green feathers and with eyes, feet, and a beak made of gold.

A sense of mystery surrounded the *teocuitlahuaque* (goldsmiths). Though given the highly esteemed title of *tolteca*, goldsmiths were believed to be from a far, remote, and exotic nation. Xipe Totec was the patron deity of the *teocuitlahuaque* and they worshipped him in a temple named Yopico (the Yopi ground). The word *Yopi* was the name of the people who lived in the western parts of the mountains reaching the Pacific Ocean. They did not speak Nahuatl, lived independent of the Aztecs, and subsisted in very poor conditions as Sahagún (1951-1969) has suggested. Even though they had their own customs and cultural traditions, they were embedded in the Aztec world, and were considered rich due to their abilities to manipulate and work gold.



Figure 49. Eagle Warrior (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 50. Miclantecuhtli (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 51. Xipe Totec (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 52. Vessel with Mask of Tlaloc (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 53. Funerary Urn with Image of Tezcatlipoca (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 54. Flute (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 55. Huehuetl of Malinalco (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 56. Rollout of Huehuetli of Malinalco (drawing Lluvia Arras).



Figure 57. Teponaztli of a Feline (photo Fernando González y González).



Figure 58. Teponaztli with Effigy of a Warrior.



Figure 59. Headdress of Motecuhzoma II (Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).

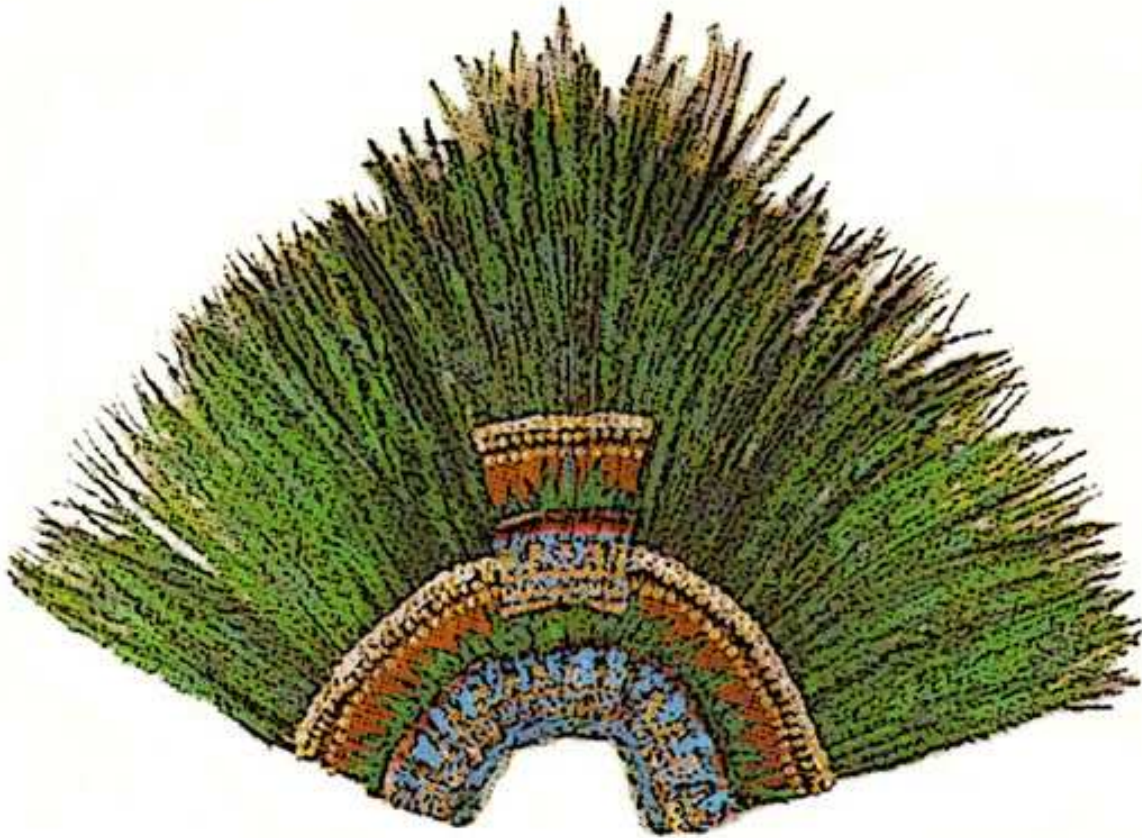


Figure 60. Headdress of Motecuhzoma II.



Figure 62. Feathered Fan from Vienna (Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).

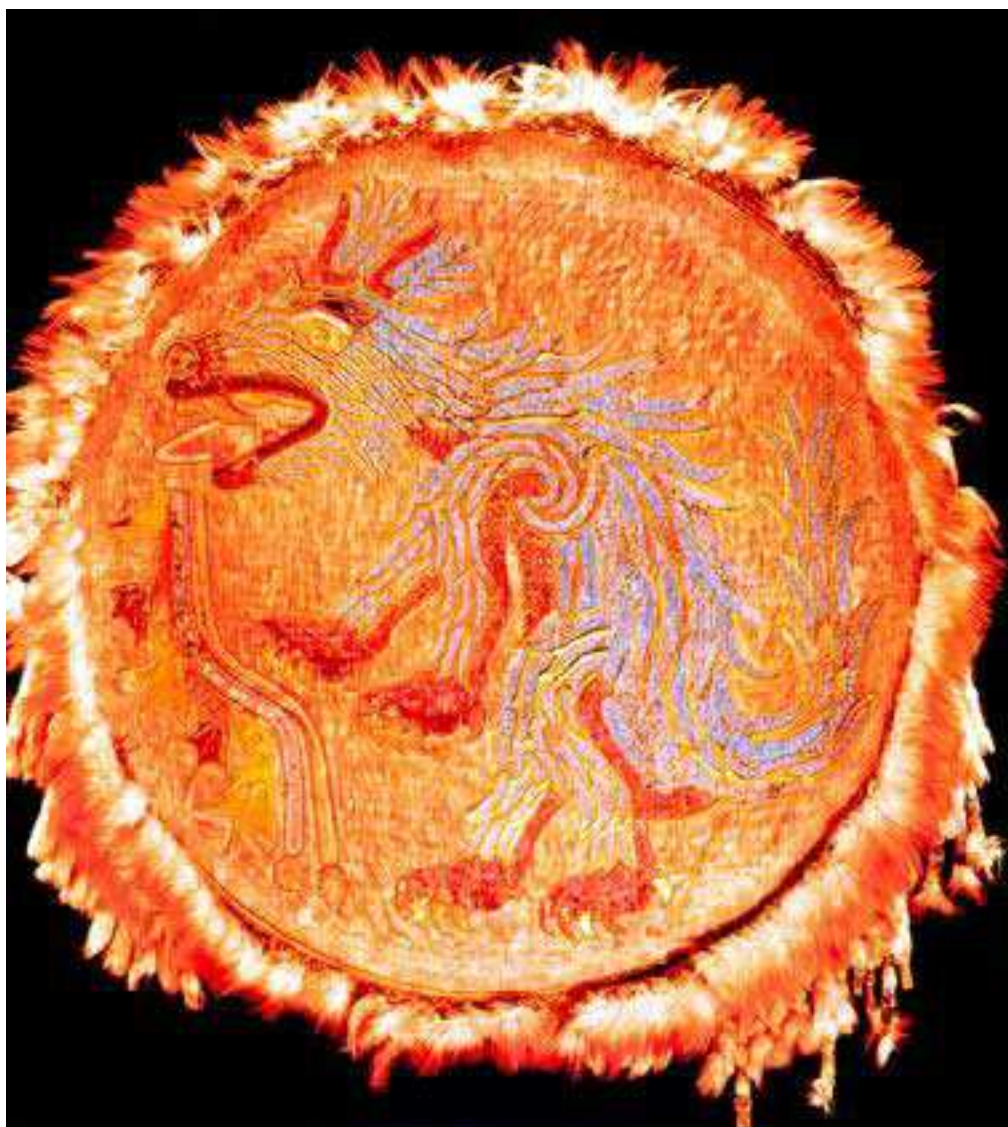
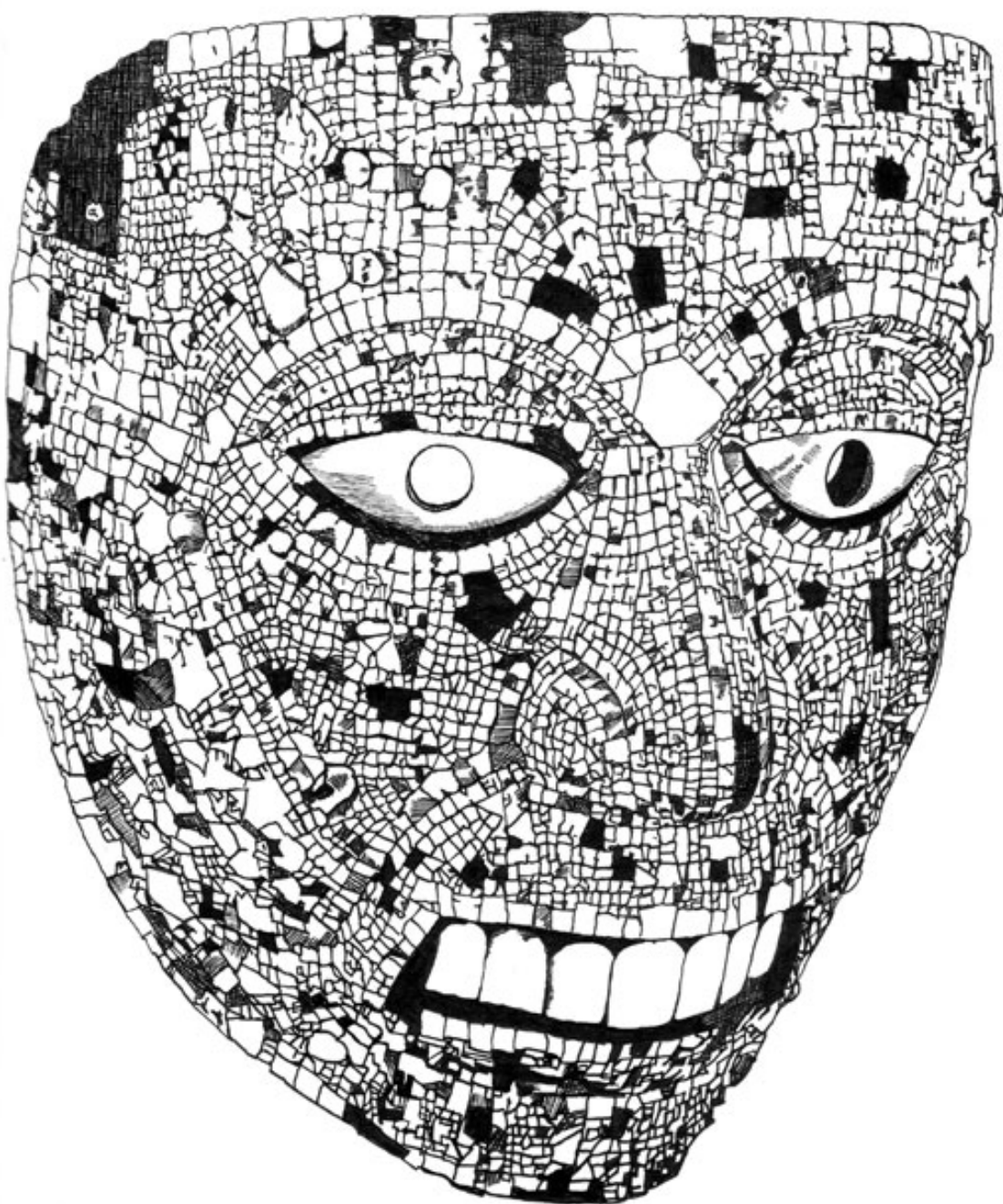


Figure 63. Ahuizotl Shield (photo Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).

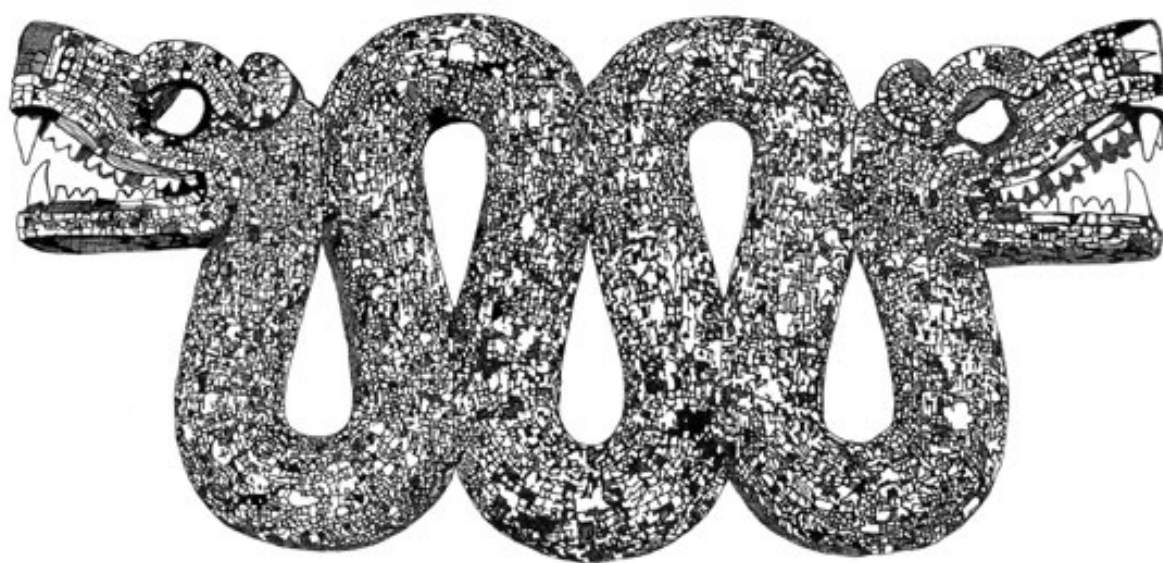


Figure 64. Chalice Cover (Manuel Aguilar-Moreno).



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Figure 66. Turquoise and Shell Mask (drawing Annelys Pérez).



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Figure 67. Double-Headed Serpent Pectoral (drawing Annelys Pérez and Lluvia Arras).



Figure 68. Knife Blade with an image of a Face (photo Fernando González y González).

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